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Transition: Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

Music: “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest this week is—and I'm pretty comfortable making this assertion—he's the first person we've had on our program for whom an entire camera technique has been named. If you've ever used iMovie to cut a video, you probably already know who I'm talking about: Ken Burns. *Civil War, National Parks, Jazz, the Brooklyn Bridge*—Ken Burns is an artist who has dedicated much of his life to telling the story of America. He does it in epic documentaries, sometimes 10, 15, or 20 hours. He immerses himself in research, thousands of primary sources, hours and hours of interviews with academics and enthusiasts.

His most recent work applies that same approach to a non-American subject, Leonardo da Vinci. Over four hours, Burns and his co-directors—his daughter Sarah Burns and his son-in-law David McMahon—examine the life and work of one of the greatest minds. And among the many voices included is that of director Guillermo del Toro.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Music: Spirited orchestral music with airy vocalizations.

Guillermo del Toro: There is a delightful, unbridled joy of curiosity in him. His duty is to the question. His duty is to the thirst for knowledge. Basically, he says, “The thing that was given to me by the universe was the chance to question it. And that is my divine duty.”

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: Ken Burns, welcome to *Bullseye*. I am so happy to have you on the show.

Ken Burns: It's my pleasure. Thank you, Jesse.

Jesse Thorn: Ken, you're the world's—certainly America's, probably the world's—number one talking head star-maker. And as I was listening to that and watching the documentary and watching Guillermo del Toro, I thought, “How did he land on Guillermo del Toro?” (*Chuckles.*) Like, of all the great people in the world to talk about Leonardo da Vinci, how did he end up in the movie?

Ken Burns: A variety of reasons. I've known Guillermo for a number of years. We intersect quite often at the Telluride Film Festival, where we premiere our films. And so, he's just been an extraordinary filmmaker I've had the privilege to meet. We—Sarah Burns and David McMahon—my two co directors on this and I, were interested in not just interviewing the obvious historians and scholars who've spent their lives plowing the vineyards of Leonardo's life, but also wanted to see the people who had incorporated him in some way because of his just utter modernity into now. And that meant theatre directors and engineers and heart surgeons and writers and painters. And in this case, a filmmaker.

And my daughter Sarah, Sarah Burns, had read somewhere that he kept a number of notebooks—Guillermo did—that were filled with these fantastical drawings and monsters and fanciful figures and combined it with text. And they reminded her of the notebooks of Leonardo—which are, of course, the primary evidence of this extraordinary life.

And so, we in COVID arranged a Zoom with Guillermo and just sort of wanted to see if he in any way understood Leonardo. About five seconds in I'm waving my hands, “Guillermo don't say anything more! We're coming out to LA to film you.”

(Jesse laughs.)

And that was it. And so, I had the great privilege of interviewing him. And he's—as you know—throughout the film and has that pride of position along with Leonardo, the first voice you hear—the second voice after a second or so of Leonardo—is Guillermo. And they kind of trade a couple of comments at the opening of the film to give, I think, the broader context—what you just played.

Jesse Thorn: One of the big questions of the movie is to what extent and in what ways Leonardo is modern. Because the Renaissance was like both the flowering of human knowledge and the sort of dawn of/pre-science.

So, what did you learn about that question in making the film?

Ken Burns: Well, I think the Renaissance is, in the face of things, an utterly modern phenomenon in its day. The world—the Western world, at least—is emerging out of the Dark Ages, in medieval times.

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They've suddenly reached back 1,500 years to the Classical period and begun to reinvestigate what the Classics had to tell them. The Aristoteles, the Platos, the Archimedes, the Galens. They're also exploring the world, and they're making contact with other cultures. And while the Western tradition is sort of firmly rooted in observation—that's an inheritance of Socrates and Plato and Aristotle—the Muslim world and other cultures are rooted in experimentation—mathematics, other things. And so, there's a real flourishing of knowledge.

And at this point, particularly in Florence—in a city-state in the middle of the Italian peninsula—there is a flourishing of art and architecture. And painting is undergoing a

transformation, and Leonardo sort of caught the wave at the right moment. And it's so interesting. As a young boy born out of wedlock, and therefore sort of locked out of traditional educational possibilities—essentially, what we'd say going to university, becoming a scholar, a man of letters. He has, as his first teacher, nature. And he begins this lifelong quest to sort of ask the central questions of it. The Renaissance is recentering, with humanism, the human being in the position of things. It isn't just the church and the religious stories somehow. Something's emerging.

And as he develops his painting style, Leonardo is great at dimensions, at single-point linear perspective. He's great at Sfumato and Chiaroscuro, these techniques that'll give a three-dimension to people, a sense that you're really looking at somebody who's real and not the kind of plastic, often two-dimensional, flat images that we've inherited—some of them quite beautiful—from medieval and before-that times. Mostly religious iconography. And he's giving dimension to them. He wants to know the intentions of their minds, as he said.

So, you're beginning to realize that he's painting not just a visual moment, but he's painting a psychological activity, a mental activity, an emotional activity, a spiritual activity. And so, these paintings of his are suddenly radical. And all of a sudden a painter is no longer an artisan and sort of, you know, a craftsman.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, you mentioned he was illegitimate and thus couldn't go to college. And it's like one of the things that is thrilling about him as a figure to people now is that he feels like he comes from a world where one person could explore and know everything.

Ken Burns: That's correct. And I would say it is thrilling. That's exactly the word. But I wouldn't say illegitimate, just as I wouldn't say that any person is illegal. He's born out of wedlock. And that both circumscribes in one way, but perhaps liberates in another. And we can't really say what is it that produced this thing. It's just a gift to us that keeps on giving.

I remember many years ago—it's approaching 30 years ago—I made a film on Thomas Jefferson. And in it, George Will made the astounding suggestion that Thomas Jefferson was maybe the man of the last millennium—then it was the ending of the current millennium—because he had distilled that century of enlightenment thinking. And he suggested too that it was possible if you knew Latin, if you knew German, if you knew French, you could probably know just about everything there was to know then.

But I think it's Leonardo who really does it. When he finally finds his last patron—the perfect patron, the King of France—he thinks he's importing to his court Aristotle. Which is, you know, a wonderful, lovely comparison. Aristotle is a great philosopher and writer and thinker, as is Leonardo. But Aristotle was not the greatest painter of his age; nor was he the greatest scientist of his age; or somebody who had sort of mastered all these disciplines and remained not just curious about the central philosophical questions, but sort of down in the nitty gritty where you spend—without a microscope or a telescope—your time with his eye, just understanding the world. And that overwhelming curiosity that has lit Guillermo del Toro on fire, and now us, is just a wonder to behold, and I'm totally subscribed to your description of “thrilling”.

Jesse Thorn: We've got a lot more to get into with Ken Burns after a break. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Ken Burns. He is—I mean, you know. He's one of the most revered documentary filmmakers ever. He's made movies about jazz, the Civil War, baseball, and many more subjects.

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His latest is a two-part miniseries on the artist and scientist Leonardo da Vinci. Let's get back into our conversation.

Leonardo left, as you said, very few paintings but just these voluminous sets of notes. And his notes often took the form of drawings. Every page is full of drawings. And it seems like drawing is kind of how he understood the world. Like, he made all these military devices that may or may not have actually worked, but like— There's a point in the film where someone says probably his biggest contribution to military technology was overhead map.

Ken Burns: Yeah. He did the first—there's a strategically important, small Italian town east of Florence called Imola. And he drew without the benefit of getting up on any high ground or up in the air, of course. He's able to produce this map, which tells you a little bit about this mind. Yes, the pages are just a wonderful compendium of thoughts and treatises and drawings.

And drawing's really the fundamental beginning. If you can't draw—the painter Kerry Marshall says—you know, this is the beginning of it. And we think that Leonardo created the very first—it's a drawing, not a painting—the very first landscape in Western culture. Backgrounds had kind of been not important, and suddenly they were gaining importance. But he had on his own painted a landscape of the Arno River Valley that is pretty spectacular in the variety of things that he did. He's also got the first experimental painting, *The Adoration of the Magi*, which he abandoned. And it's a magnificent work, even in that abandonment—is something that he was working on and changing all the time.

And that may seem kind of “Well, isn't that what painters always do?” But they didn't. They sort of had a sketch, they had a cartoon, a preliminary drawing, and then they executed the painting like craftsmen. And here he's doing something else and trying to understand. And there's a figure in *The Adoration of the Magi*, someone that we all believe is Leonardo. It looks like early pictures of this handsome, very beautiful young man, looking away—the only person kind of disinterested in the proceedings, which is this cacophony of horses and, you know, three wise men and Mary and Jesus and the entourages of the kings. And everybody's looking and stuff's going on in the background.

He's looking away. And so, it seemed to me that either of the questions that he wanted this painting to answer, the painting wasn't going to answer, and he left it. Or he had been satisfied that he was going to get out—he'd gotten out of it what he wanted to get out of it.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, that *Adoration* painting is remarkable in part because it has this, of course, dramatic religious meaning. You know, it's the birth of Christ and everything. But it has this specific insight, which is that each of these people in the frame have their own distinct reaction to the experience of seeing a savior. Which is a really big deal, because it's not just standard awe/reverence. You know what I mean?

Ken Burns: Exactly. Exactly. No, no, the stock and trade of all painters are these religious scenes or commissions of portraits, you know, things like that. And they're all very familiar. You know, his first painting is the Annunciation, and it's different from any other Annunciation that's ever been made. And it's because he is giving and extending to each individual their humanness and asking questions of each person there, so that the Last Supper is not just a frozen moment as it had always been, with the same sort of uniform faces, but this sort of many moments. So, it's almost as if he's invented film. You know, things are going on.

And a lot of it—I think this getting at the intentions of the mind, the intentions of the heart, gives not only more to that three-dimensional reality—like, you really feel there's somebody there behind the paint and pigment and gesso on a poplar panel, but that there's time involved too; that this appreciation has opened up a new dimension for not only him—or maybe it's automatic, and he's not even thinking about that. But it opens up for us a new dimension and suggests new possibilities for painting and I think for seeing in general. And that's the great gift, and I think continues to be adding little scores to our modernity question.

Jesse Thorn: This movie is very necessarily different from other work that you and your daughter and son-in-law have made. For one thing, it is—you know, it's about the most visual thing in the world, which is like maybe the greatest artist ever. But it's also really, really far in the past.

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So, there is very little, other than the works themselves and those notebooks, to look at. And it is far away from America, which has been your main subject matter.

Ken Burns: Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: So, what was it like to take on a project that you knew would have to work somewhat differently than these many films that you've made in the past?

Ken Burns: Well, I got dragged kicking and screaming into this project. Walter Isaacson, who I was working with, he'd written a biography of Benjamin Franklin. And I was working on a biography of Benjamin Franklin, so he was somebody to interview along with many, many others. And one night at dinner, he had reminded me that he'd written a biography of Leonardo and that I should pair them together.

And I go, “Walter, I don't do non-American stuff.”

And finally, you know, we left the dinner, and I was talking to Sarah and Dave, and I said, “Walter was pushing Leonardo.”

And they said, “Why not?”

And I just said, “Of course. Why not?”

Jesse Thorn: She was like, “Hey Dad, we wouldn't mind moving to Italy for a while.”
(*Chuckles.*)

Ken Burns: Well, they—you know, what they realized is that they would have to, and they did hazardous duty, you know. But I really owe it to them. They're the writers of the script as well—that in order to do the research, in order to film the live cinematography that could stand in for the equivalents to find the other paintings of Florence, to film Florence now as a possible stand-in for Florence then, to understand the extent of the Codex, to meet the scholars—not just American scholars and writers, but the French and Italian scholars that populate the film. It was necessary to pick up and do that.

And then I think it was also their understanding that the lateral thinking—as Sarah describes Leonardo's work—required that we had to venture into some really scary territory for us. If you think about how our films have always been, we've treated a painting or a still photograph as if it was real and moving. And we filmed it the way a feature film maker would a master shot with a wide, a medium, a close, a tilt, a pan, a reveal, an insert of details. And we're also listening to it. So, there's an oral dimension. You know, are the cannon firing, are the horses clip-clopping, is the bat cracking? All of those are questions we ask.

And so, we're trying to take the two-dimensionality—the plasticity, artists call it—of the surface of something and get you to pretend. But here we felt we could split the screen. Which is dangerous, because we're saying, “Oh no, these are two dimensional. These are plastic. They're just things.” But it allowed us to then incorporate—the way I could not do with Benjamin Franklin, nor can I do with a project I've been working on for the last eight years on the history of the American Revolution, also in a period without photographs or newsreels—to range to the 20th century.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, your films aren't exactly all hyper-literal.

(*Ken agrees.*)

As you said, you know, sometimes we hear the crack of the bat. And sometimes we see Jackie Robinson running around the bases in one place when we're hearing about Jackie Robinson running around the bases in another place. You know, it's not one-for-one.

Ken Burns: No. And that kind of equivalency is deaf anyway. Illustration, maybe. What you're looking for is something—a larger relationship to things.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, and like the thing about this film—right?—is that we don't know that much about the biography of Leonardo da Vinci, at least relative to how important of a human being he is. Like, you know, where he went and—

Ken Burns: These are not diaries. You're absolutely right. These are not diaries. And that—like the lack of a formal education—I think we can take as biographers, film biographers, as a blessing too. Because that tick-tock of tabloid stuff, what I feel, the things you get from the diaries, they're just not there. We know few things.

Jesse Thorn: This morning, I watched a short promotional video that you made for Hampshire College—where you went to school—with my friend, the very brilliant comedian, Eugene Mirman, who also went to Hampshire.

Ken Burns: (*Laughs.*) I haven't thought about that in years.

Jesse Thorn: So, here's what this video for Hampshire College made me think of, right? The premise of this video, essentially, is that you're creating a quote/unquote “Ken Burns documentary” about Eugene Mirman in real-time. The film crew ambushes him in bed; he wakes up terrified; and you're, you know, grabbing a painting off his wall, shoving it in front of the camera, and panning it around. Basically. While a narrator, you know, reads into a microphone by the headboard of his bed. And like, on the one hand, we've all had a great time laughing about Ken Burns, panning cameras around historical photographs. Certainly.

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But the thing that really struck me was not that—which was funny; it was the idea of you and a crew out in the world, chasing things around. And I thought, “I wonder if Ken Burns ever like writes in his notebook of big ideas, ‘Movie where mostly I go out in the world and chase things around.’”

(*They laugh.*)

Ken Burns: No, we do chase things around endlessly. And you would assume, Jesse, that this making of a film would involve—would be additive. And it's not. It's subtractive. You know? We'll collect 40/50 times as much material in order to have the critical mass necessary to distill it, whatever you—you know, I live in New Hampshire; we make maple syrup. It takes 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of maple syrup, you know. That's our process. The cutting room floor is not filled—Or maybe sculpture is a good one. The cutting room floor is not filled with bad stuff; it's all good stuff.

And the negative space of creation has got to be honored by only those of us who are making it. It's gloriously collaborative too. That's what's so wonderful. But we are chasing all the time after stuff. What's funny is that that self-referential aspect of it just doesn't really enter into any of our—certainly not my—sort of considerations. And yet we understand the way in which, because of the kind of single-mindedness of that pursuit, that it is eminently—you know, people can parody it.

I've been on—you know, I've been the butt of *Simpsons* for four or five *Simpsons* episodes. Every late-night host has made up a Ken Burns film. And it's—you know, you absolutely deserve it, I feel. (*Chuckles.*) But it's interesting, because we're all about just trying to figure out where that story is.

Jesse Thorn: Okay, but have you never thought, “I want to go make a movie like *Spellbound* or *The War Room* or *Salesman*,” or something where the thing is unfolding in front of you?

Ken Burns: Yeah, there's always been an interest in cinéma vérité. I've been wanting to be a—when you said *Spellbound*, I immediately thought you were referring to Alfred Hitchcock.

(*They chuckle.*)

And only your second choice told me that you were not.

Jesse Thorn: I'm talking about the one where the kid goes, (*robotically*) “Do I sound like a musical robot?” Which is, as far as I'm concerned, the best moment in American cinema. (*Laughs.*) Sorry, Hitchcock.

Ken Burns: Well, I'd offer other things. But my original impulse to become a filmmaker at age 12 was just seeing the power and emotion from Hollywood films and then later French new wave and Italian neorealism and old silence and new German and new American in the '70s. And so—I mean, that's my first love, and I always assumed that's what I'd be. And I ended up at Hampshire, where everybody was a social documentary still photographer.

And that kind of rearranged my molecules. And then I left somehow interested in American history, though I'd never took a course in American history in college. (*Chuckles.*) You know, it's just I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. And that's, in and of itself, a wonderful thing. But *Leonardo* may not seem to someone from the outside that big a departure, but it feels huge to us. And we'll just see where things lead us.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I wondered if making this film—which, you know, again, I think somebody who saw this would think, “Oh, this is a film made by Ken Burns and his family.” You know what I mean? It's not like it's a complete revolution in the aesthetics of your filmmaking. But you know, you are in your early 70s. And it is very different in significant ways from stuff that you've—you know—made your rep on.

Ken Burns: And I credit Sarah Burns and David McMahon for having that kind of energy to be able to move in those directions. Just as, you know, I'm thrilled with some of the solutions we're having with a totally different production team in the American Revolution about how to deal with those problems that I was just describing.

So, it's hard to—for *Leonardo*, it was all about process. For us, it's all about process. And that may be the answer to a lot of things—not just the original modernity question, but also why you would abandon something. I don't have that luxury. I can't abandon something. I've delivered everything on time, and raised all the money myself in PBS for these projects.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, that's not how public television works, baby. (*Laughs.*) You don't get a lot of second shots.

Ken Burns: No, but I end up at the end of the day owning my films. And every film is a director's cut. And I—you know, it may be the tortoise to the hare of all these other things. It has one foot in the marketplace and the other proudly out of it.

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But it just ends up providing me with the sort of—it sets a pick that permits us to do the deep dives.

Jesse Thorn: Even more still to come with Ken Burns. Look, we've talked a lot about movies, but we haven't yet talked about quilts! Ken Burns is the undisputed quilt king of America, which is a title that I have given him just now. But you'd be surprised how well it fits. We'll talk about it after the break. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is documentarian Ken Burns. His newest project is a two-part miniseries about Leonardo da Vinci.

It's a pretty tough and scary time for all of public broadcasting right now, for a variety of reasons. You know, one is the same reasons that it's a tough and scary time for broadcast radio and television generally, which is that there's a lot more choices. It's a lot harder to bring together a mass audience in one place.

One is that, you know, government funding is constantly under threat. And who knows, at some point perhaps the political convenience of threatening will be outweighed by the political benefits of doing something—or ideological benefits, or whatever.

But you know, you have stuck with public broadcasting—for which we public broadcasters are grateful. But what do you see changing, and what do you think might have to change about how public broadcasting works for it to continue to thrive into the future?

Ken Burns: I'm pretty sanguine about it, frankly. I understand all the pressures that you're talking about, the way in which it's buffeted. But I can tell you that as soon as I had had any modicum of reputation—that probably means not the beginning with the *Brooklyn Bridge*, the first film that was nominated for an Oscar—but probably with the seventh film, *Civil War*, which had a big footprint—that I've spent a good deal of my life trying to convince people to continue funding, appropriating, and authorizing in the House and the Senate. You know, it felt like every year for a while—one committee, subcommittee, or another.

And so, these are not new pressures. At the same time, I can tell you that in 1990, when I brought the film *The Civil War* before its broadcast to the semiannual press tour in Los Angeles, everybody said, “Oh, this is terrific.” All the critics. “This is terrific, but no one's going to watch it, because everybody's watching MTV videos. And nobody has an attention

span anymore.” And they said the same thing about *Baseball* and *Jazz* and *World War II* and *The National Parks*, but they didn't say that about *The Roosevelts*, and they didn't say that about *Vietnam* or *Country Music*.

That's because the choice you talked about, that kind of tsunami of options. People now binge. You know, meaning, you can—I mean, for a while they were saying it was no longer MTV videos; it was now, you know, cats playing with balls of yarn on YouTube. And all of those things are okay, MTV videos and cats. But all real meaning accrues in duration. And doing long form, we've just stuck with it through thick and thin. And supposedly, you know, this is the last.

But as to the political stuff, I don't know. It's always been— You know, there was a senator from South Dakota who was talking about zeroing out the funding for PBS and, you know, didn't get reelected. I mean, there's—the mythology of public broadcasting is that it's somehow—or I should only speak about PBS, which is what I know about, is that it's—somehow it's this blue state institution that's the Upper West Side and it's Nob Hill.

When in fact, it's more central to the lives of people in what we would call red state or rural communities, where it's not just the superb primetime schedule, but obviously the children's programming and lifelong learning and classroom of the air, crop reports, weather, homeland security stuff that we just do day in and day out.

It's the largest network in the country. There are 335 individual PBS stations. And so, that sort of belies kind of conventional wisdom. And we're in a place right now where everything kind of belies conventional wisdom. So, I think you're right to bring up a question about the existential nature of these things. But we've been the tortoise in the tortoise and the hare story.

Jesse Thorn: I like to watch on YouTube—well, for one thing, I like to watch capybaras.

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Which is a giant river rodent from South America. They're very funny, and they're very cute when they're swimming around. Another thing I like to watch is—and I've watched more than one—is videos of you showing off your quilts. And when I say I've watched—

Ken Burns: (*Chuckling.*) That's so funny. Really?!

Jesse Thorn: When—I've watched more than one. I'm not talking about to prepare for this interview; I'm talking about in my regular, day-to-day life. I'm like, “Oh, new video of Ken Burns's quilts just dropped.”

Ken Burns: We need to get you more stuff to do. I don't watch anything, because I'm always working on the stuff that we're working on, and there's several things. And by the end of the day, there's maybe time to check something.

But, yeah, I've been collecting quilts for more than—I guess, 50 years I've been collecting quilts. And I love them. They're wonderful. You know, what I try to do, I pick a topic when we're going to make a film—Brooklyn Bridge, or Vietnam, whatever, the things we've been talking about, Leonardo—and you try to know everything you can know about them. A quilt is, in and of itself—even if it's signed “Hannah”, you don't know if she's 18 or 28 or 88. You don't know if she's happy or sad, rich or poor. But there's this magnificent creation.

And so, I have about 100 dear friends that are Amish and Mennonite I kinda know. And they're just 19th century, which I mostly know, a few early 20th centuries. And I have to accept that they're mysteries and enigmas and riddles, but they satisfy me. They're hanging everywhere, and I sleep under them, and I look at them. And when a quilt museum wanted to send them on a tour, I missed them. And when they came back, and I told them they couldn't send it to another city—they had to send them back—I left them out on a big, long 14-foot table and just stared at them for months and months.

Until somebody said, “You know, every once in a while we're going to have to eat on this table. So, maybe we can put them back in the glass cabinets where you can still see them.” Yeah, I love them. They're really great. I swore to one of my colleagues I was not buying another quilt. That was about 10 or 12 quilts ago.

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughs.*) You ever make a quilt? Catch you pickin' and stitchin'?

Ken Burns: No, my late wife did. And I've got a couple of them that I am really, really, really fond of. Beautiful quilts. She loved them. These are crib quilts that she made. And she made some larger ones, but the two spectacular ones that Amy Stechler made, I have. And they are just amazing works. But they're modern, and so I don't—I mean, I'm looking for something that's ancient and old and American.

Jesse Thorn: What makes them American?

Ken Burns: Well, that they were made in America. That's it. I mean, there's so varied, and I—you know, lots of people get into quilts, and they know that this is a Star of Bethlehem, and this is Postage Stamp, and this is Log Cabin, and this is that, and this is that. And I'm not really interested in going deep into that. I just am drawn to the emotional thing they do to me when I first see it. You know? And I can know in an instant.

You know, people now know that I like quilts. And so, I get sent tons of quilts all the time. And I'm mostly—I'm going, “Nope, nope, nope, nope! (*Gasps.*)” You know, and it's that. I love that still and then have a relationship—and I've got enough places where I can have them out and see them and not have them just sort of be in drawers and hidden.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, they're so physical and tactile. They are real works of art. They are also practical items. And I think maybe the thing that is the most powerful to me about them is the idea that they are so often made from scraps, right? That it is a way of creating a whole from, often, what is lying around.

Ken Burns: Yeah, no, it's really true. And in fact, one of my favorite quilts of all is a Gee's Bend quilt. It's a group of African American women in a bend in the Alabama river in Alabama, and they've formed a collective. And so, the woman who made this quilt, I believe, is still alive—Lucy Mingo. that I have. And it's just this wild, and it doesn't follow the rules. It's wonderfully kind of zig and zagging and doing things. And it's a riot of color, this particular one. And then down at the bottom, there is this Levi's jacket. You know how they've got a kind of button, a kind of triangular flap over the breast pocket with a brass button? And that's there too.

The first quilt I ever got was made by my grandmother. And it was made by the scraps of all of the blankets and the sweaters and the skirts and the trousers from the '40s and the '50s. And I was her oldest grandson, and I got the first quilt. Everybody got one. And I slept under it—like, from the moment I got it, the rest of—

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You know, until it was so fragile that I needed to stop. And I've restored it and done the best I could—very thick and heavy. And I still miss the weight of it and sleeping under it. So, I'm bracketed by this Gee's Bend quilt that has that kind of same just grabbing at the materials that you have and the same thing that my grandmother did.

Jesse Thorn: Well, Ken Burns, I sure appreciate your time and your work, and it was really nice to talk to you.

Ken Burns: Yeah. It was my pleasure. Thank you, Jesse.

Jesse Thorn: Ken Burns. His documentary, *Leonardo da Vinci*, is airing and streaming now on PBS. His quilt collection can be viewed if you search for “Ken Burns quilts” on the internet. Buckle up and get cozy. His quilts are genuinely amazing.

Transition: Funky, relaxed synth.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun in and around Los Angeles, California—as well as Maximum Fun HQ, overlooking beautiful MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California. I have to tent my house this weekend because of these clothing moths. (*Muttering.*) Oh, I hate these clothing moths. Anyway, I gotta carry all the food in my house out here into my backyard work shed. Just gonna have a shed full of frozen food.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Daniel Huecias. Our video editor is Daniel Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our pal Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at DJWSounds.bandcamp.com. Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. It is called “Huddle Formation”. Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where you will find video from just about all of our interviews, including the ones that you heard this week. And I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)